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ABSTRACT

Virtually all composition research has been done about teaching methodology; little research about the theory of the process of composition has been done. A 1964 study, the first on the composition process, used as an operational definition the concept of the composing process as being a series: prewriting, writing, and rewriting. This linear stage model has been assumed since it was first proposed without questioning the theoretical soundness of it. In fact, the model better describes the written product than the process. One alternative description of the composing process describes three aspects: a sequence across time of connected events that are believed to be causally linked to a particular result, a series of operations that can recur again and again, and a series of circumstances that lead to certain results. (TJ)

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Toward a Theory of the Composing Process

Research in the field of written composition has been conditioned in large part by two major concerns: (1) Concern with problems of application, or teaching methodologies, rather than with problems of theory. (2) Concern with describing the composing process as a series of stages.

The field of composition has traditionally been an applied discipline, and in keeping with this tradition, composition reasearch has usually been directed towards pedogogical goals. The field is dominated by studies with methodological and pedogogical intentions. For decades researchers have focused their energies towards defending classroom techniques and trying to solve the proverbial quest--why are students not learning to write and how can we better teach them? Of the 504 studies conducted before 1963, listed in Research in Written Composition, 502 studies are instructional studies and only two studies are even indirectly concerned with theoretical investigations of the composing process.

A search through back issues since 1963 of Research in the Teaching of English, College Composition and Communication, College English, and Dissertation Abstracts yields a plethora of methodology studies. Whatever is culturally or intellectually in vogue seems to have been tested to see what effects these methods might have upon the written products of students. Studies with titles such as, "Teaching Composition with a Problem-Solving Approach," "The Effects of Role-Playing on the Improvement of Writing," or "The Effect of Bio-Feedback Training on the quality of College Students' Writing" represent the direction composition research has taken.

The problem with many of these numerous, sometimes conflicting, in-

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structional studies is that they lack a clearly articulated theoretical base and have not only yielded very little towards a theory of the composing process, but also have restricted our thinking about composition to classroom problems. Instead of working with theoretical problems about the nature of written lar, age, too much composition research has been aimed at developing new methods of teaching or trying to find out which method is most effective.

By emphasizing methodology over theory, researchers have blurred the important distinction between the teaching of writing and learning how to write; we do not yet understand how effective writers write outside of classroom situations or what sound writing techniques are, and yet we are inundated with research on divergent methods of teaching composition.

Consequently, the direction of most composition research has been backwards. This concern for methodology over theory is similar to a concern for a technology before there is a science to support it. Steinman (1975) has suggested that the almost universally acknowledged failure of freshman composition is chiefly due to the lack of any basic theoretical support. The teaching of composition remains a technology without, and not even in search of, a science.

What would seem to be missing for the development of a theoretical base is a serious questioning about the cognitive processes involved in writing. There has been no research on basic questions such as, what governs the lexical, syntactical, and rhetorical choices a writer makes or what neuro-linguistic and psycho-linguistic mechanisms are involved in the writing process. We hypothesize that composing is a complex cognitive activity that engages visual, motor, and cognitive competencies, but we lack a process grammer--a set of statements on how the composing process works. Undoubtedly, some of our assumptions about composing

implicit in various methodologies will be challenged when we know more about the composing process.

In what studies there have been on the composing process, lacking a theoretical base, yet needing a way to get a grasp upon this complex process called composing, researchers began to describe the composing process in terms of stages. In 964, Rohman and Wlecke's, "Pre-writing: The Construction and Application of Models for Concept Formation in Writing," was the first study on the composing process. Rohman and Wlecke's operational definition of the composing process was, "Writing is usually described as a process, something which shows continuous change in time like growth in organic nature. Different things happen at different stages in the process of putting words on to paper. We divided the process at the point where the writing idea is ready for the words and the page: everything before that we call pre-writing, everything after writing and rewriting." (Rohman and Wlecke, 1964, p. 9)

Two essential ideas about the Rohman and Wlecke study must be understood since their definition of the composing process provided the framework for Emig's (1971) study on "The Composing Process of Twelfth Graders", and for numerous researchers since 1971 who have used Emig's study as a model.

(1) Although pre-writing, for Rohman and Wlecke, was a contemporary transformation of the classical rhetorical concept of invention, they used the term to carry a dual meaning; pre-writing represented both a stage in the writing process and the various methodological strategies which can be used to encourage the discovery process.

(2) Rohman and Wlecke segmented the composing process into three distinct stages: pre-writing, writing, and rewriting. By their definition, pre-writing is understood both in very temporal terms (the time before you start writing) and in very qualitative terms (as a period of discovery

and insight.) According to their concept of the composing process, whatever goes on during the pre-writing stage is characteristically different from what goes on during the writing and rewriting stages.

Rohman and Wlecke's stage conception of the composing process has had a decidedly pervasive influence upon the field of composition. Despite the fact that Rohman and Wlecke's study was an experiment in instruction and that their categories were arbitrary lines of demarcation, researchers have continued to use these categories a priori, equating these stages with discrete temporal and qualitative junctures in the composing process. Composition specialists quickly jumped to develop new methodologies using Rohman and Wlecke's stage conception without even asking whether such stages exist, and without questioning the theoretical soundness of such a conception.

The effect of this stage notion can be found in the direction of composition research since 1964. Methodology researchers have asked how students can be influenced during the pre-writing stage of the process (Odell 1973; Kytle, 1972), or in the rewriting stage of the process (Effros, 1971; Kelley, 1975; Hansen, 1971). Researchers have sought to describe and characterize the distinquishing composing behaviors of students during all three stages, pre-writing, writing, and rewriting (Emig, 1971; Stallard, 1972; Mischel, 1973). Emig's premise was that there are elements, moments, and stages within the composing process which can be distinquished and characterized in some detail. Composition teachers have been prompted to teach writing as a three-stage process, not as a product (Murray, 1972), and the three stages of the composing process became the organizing principle for many composition textbooks. These texts sought to convince students of the necessity to direct their energies to all three stages of the process if they were to produce an effective essay (Gehle and Rollo, 1977; Grey, 1972).

This linear stage model of the composing process is a metaphorical description and as with all metaphors or analogies it has the potential of being either helpful or misleading. The crucial question is whether the similarities the metaphor captures are significant or superficial. With this metaphorical description of the composing process, what seems to be missing is a serious questioning of the underlying assumptions of the linear stage model. If we say that the composing process can be described as a series of stages, what does this say about our conception of how a writer writes: Are we saying that composing is a linear and one-directional process? And if so, what are the requirements of this linear system?

A linear system, according to systems theory, demands that we must be able to recover past states and predict future states of the system as when we develop a photograph or when we follow a prescribed recipe. If composing was only such a linear activity, then we should be able to construct a behavioral checklist in which we predict that at a given point a writer should be in the thinking stage of the process, then he will gather information, then he will write, and then he will rewrite. If these stages were reliable and valid junctures, then we should have completion criteria for each stage so that we could tell when one stage is terminated and another begins. Each stage must be mutually exclusive or else it becomes trivial and counterproductive to refer to these junctures as stages.

With our present state of knowledge, we lack a finite set of criteria by which we could judge where one stage of the process begins and the other ends, and it seems neither adequate nor helpful only to describe composing as a linear sequence of stages. It is probably true that any observable behavior, including composing, must unfold linearly over time, but inasmuch as we are able to see significant recurring patterns in a

linear sequence of events, we can hypothesize that the composing process is both linear and recursive. Thus, it is possible to view the composing process as not just a linear series of stages, but rather as a hierarchial set of sub-processes. Such an understanding of the composing process yields the conception of the writer moving in a series of non-linear movements from one sub-process to another while he constantly moves the force of his attention among matters of content, style, and structure; solving continuous sets and sub-sets of complex cognitive, lexical, syntactical, and rhetorical problems. It is not that a writer merely conceives of an idea, lets it incubate, and the produces it, but rather that he is constantly defining, and redefining, selecting and rejecting, evaluating and organizing ideas. The idea of a process suggests not just one, but a series of on-going activities. While a writer composes he is simultaneously forced into a multiplicity of roles--writer, reader, discover, censor, critic, editor. The pre-writing, writing, rewriting model of the composing process better describes the written product than the process, as it identifies stages in producing the product and not the operations of the process.

In our haste to discuss process not product, we have continued to use the same nomenclature to describe process as we used to describe product and have not developed the necessary vocabulary to discuss the sub-processes of the composing process. This distinction between process and product has been difficult to maintain; in the act of talking about process we reify it into product.

The following schema is offered as an alternative to the stage model description of the composing process and as a framework for the diverse usage of the term process.

A process can be: (1) A sequence across time of connected events which are believed to be causally linked to a particular result.

(2) A series of operations that can recur again and again.

(3) A series of circumstances that lead to certain results.

(1) A sequence across time of connected events which are believed to be causally linked to a particular result.

(A) The composing process begins with those events which lead up to the decision to begin writing.
(B) The evolution of an idea in a given piece of writing; the initial idea extended and refined.
(C) The steps of outline/first draft/redraft or first draft/outline/redraft.

(2) A series of operations that recur again and again.

(A) On the observable level, there are pauses, hesitations, scanning, and rereading.
(B) The intersection of different mental and physical activities; the encoding and decoding processes.
(C) Strategies used, such as revision strategies: consideration of reader, recognition of the difference between speech and writing, syntactical and lexical reformulations.

(3) A series of circumstances that lead to certain results.

(A) Developmental circumstances: how students' writing develops, the process of mastering different kinds of writing, the stages in the development of abilities. The development of writing abilities from writing assignment to assignment, each assignment is seen as a stepping stone.
(B) Contextual circumstances: Internal--the habits of a writer, writing behaviors, idiosyncrasies, preferences and psychological influences. External--the situation, the reason for writing, the environment, etc.